

NEWS

'Monumental Transformation' Taking Place at Hilton Washington

Hard-Hat Tour Shows Progress on Makeover

By Christopher Cole

"Renovation" may be too mild a word to describe the goings-on these days at the Hilton Washington.

The hotel – a place where presidents and politicians of every stripe converge, where major events from inaugural balls to association banquets are hosted – is in the midst of a top-to-bottom "transformation," as Hilton officials describe it.

The \$140 million project will completely remake the famous property in the District's Dupont Circle area, with the highlight for meeting planners being a huge new dedicated conference space.

Hilton executives on Aug. 5 led a contingent of local media on a hard-hat tour of the hotel, where visitors are more likely than not to run into halting construction signs if wending through the public areas on the lobby level of the property.

The overarching objective, said Frank Passanante, Hilton's Mid-Atlantic regional director of sales and marketing, is to create take the "urban adventure concept to a whole new level. It's certainly exciting."

Passanante, along with Steve Cowan, the hotel's general manager, other Hilton officials and representatives of the architects and construction companies led a walk-through of the most visible sign of the restoration – where the former Terrace Level gardens and outdoor pool area is being turned into a 30,000 square-foot multi-purpose hall.

When the project is done by summer 2010, the entire 1,070-room property will have undergone a complete change affecting guest rooms, meeting space, lobby, restaurants and a new pool.

"We are truly in the middle of a monumental transformation," Passanante said. "There is not an area of this hotel that is not currently under major construction."

He said the hotel has "embraced these two words: 'Expect More.' It's our new service culture." The "four pillars" of that philosophy, he said, are more hospitality, collaboration, experiences and D.C. authenticity. "This is the place where important things happen."

The idea of D.C. authenticity is playing into various aspects of the project, including the inspiration of meeting room names, restaurants and other new areas. For example, the new Columbia Hall reflects the poetic alternative name for America, as well as the District name



Frank Passanante, regional director of sales and marketing for Hilton Hotels Corp., gestures as he leads a media tour of the renovation project under way at the Hilton Washington. Behind him are the beginning of a new outdoor deck, which is also the roof of a large new meeting space.

and the nearby Columbia Road. The new Heights Meeting Center derives its name from the location of the hotel. The site is one of the highest elevations in D.C. and in earlier days was considered for a Mason temple as well as one of the more controversial Frank Lloyd Wright architecture designs.

The changes to the meeting areas are based on client feedback, Passanante said. "Flexibility is the key to this space

because that's what our customers asked us for."

Along with major changes to the meeting space, the hotel is creating a new courtyard and garden that sits on the roof of the new conference center. It has also been working over recent months to upgrade guest room blocks in phases, making mechanical and infrastructure improvements and building a new health club and pool.